

CATHEDRAL OF THE BLESSED SACRAMENT
1301 Thirteenth Avenue
Intown Neighborhood
Altoona
Blair County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-5516

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20013-7127

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
CATHEDRAL OF THE BLESSED SACRAMENT

Location: 1301 13th Ave., south side of 13th Avenue between 12th and 14th streets, Altoona, Blair County, Pa.

Present Owner: Altoona-Johnstown Catholic Diocese.

Present Use: Church.

Significance: Overlooking the city of Altoona from the peak of Gospel Hill, the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament is a landmark on the Altoona skyline. Although construction began in 1924 to replace a nineteenth-century parish church, it halted during the Depression, and resumed again in 1959. As a result, the cathedral's exterior represents a stark, academic, interpretation of Italy's early Renaissance cathedrals, while its interior, embellished with a modern blend of aluminum, glass and marble, is clearly a product of 1959-60.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1924-31; 1959-60. Ground was broken September 17, 1924. The cornerstone-laying ceremony, which coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of the Diocese, took place on May 30, 1926. The unfinished cathedral was dedicated September 7, 1931.
2. Architect: George I. Lovett of Philadelphia, (1872-1958). Alfred D. Reid of Pittsburgh served as architect for the completion of the interior in 1959-60.
3. Original and subsequent owners: St. John's Roman Catholic Parish purchased five lots from John Wright in the early 1850s. A lot was acquired on October 20, 1853, for \$75, and on April 10, 1854, four more lots were purchased for the sum of \$200; the cathedral and rectory stand on the ground acquired in the second transaction.
4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: Hubert Clark of Altoona was the contractor. Bethlehem Steel magnate Charles Schwab donated all of the structural steel.
5. Original plans and construction: The original plans calling for a \$1 million structure were halted in 1931. Prior to its completion, the interior of the building had exposed brick and steel, with projecting joists for the second-floor balcony. The windows had clear glass; a 1932 newspaper article noted that eventually all of the windows would be replaced with art glass, but that the work would take years. The original altar was wood, surmounted by a baldachino, and the temporary altar rail was of frame construction with metal trimmings. Temporary pews to accommodate 1,200 people also were installed in 1931.
6. Alterations and additions: In 1959, architect Alfred Reid of Pittsburgh was hired to complete the interior of the cathedral. Renovation of the side chapels was underway in summer 1989.

B. Historical Context:

St. John's Roman Catholic Church was established on this site in 1854. The founding parish included many families who were employed in the construction of the Allegheny Portage Railroad and the Staple Bend tunnel before settling in Altoona to work in the PRR shops. The first church was a small frame building, which was replaced in 1871 by a Gothic Revival-style, two-story, brick structure with twin spires rising 200 feet. Several private residences, as well as the landmark St. John's Convent building, had to be demolished to make

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way for the construction effort, which commenced September 17, 1924. The unfinished building was dedicated September 7, 1931, before a crowd of 5,000. An Altoona Mirror editorial of the same day had this to say about the new cathedral: "Its unmistakable message to the onlooker as the years roll on must surely be that belief in God and His Son the Redeemer of the World, still pervades the heart of mankind and the desire to worship Him is paramount in the soul of men and women."

Although several auxiliary buildings were demolished when the cathedral was built, St. John's School, dating from the 1880s, survives across the street. A Tudor-style convent was constructed next door to the school in 1924, completing a visually varied cathedral complex. A temporary chapel for use by St. John's parish was also erected at 1306-08 12th Ave. in 1924. Designed by local architect D. G. Puderbaugh and erected by contractor Hubert Clark, the two-story brick and tile building measured 50' x 120'. During the 1930s the social hall was the scene of theatrical productions and basketball games, and later served as a popular skating rink. It was demolished in 1961 to afford a better view of the cathedral from the downtown area. (Altoona Mirror [March 13, 1924; April 26, 1961].)

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: On the exterior, the limestone-clad Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament is a stark, academic, interpretation of Italy's early Renaissance cathedrals, while its interior, embellished with a modern blend of aluminum, glass, and marble, is clearly a product of 1959-60.
2. Condition of fabric: Excellent.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The cathedral measures 240' (13th Avenue) x 120' (13th Street) and rises 197' to the pinnacle of the dome.
2. Walls: The cathedral is faced in Indiana limestone laid in courses of smooth-faced ashlar. Forty-eight approach steps lead to the main entrance, which is flanked by two 11' niches containing bronze sculptures. The entrance also has six Ionic columns in antis surmounted by a cornice above which is a smaller second story with four fluted Corinthian pilasters that support a classical pediment.
3. Structural systems, framing: Steel and reinforced concrete. The dome is supported by twelve steel columns, each weighing 57 tons and measuring 108'-4" in length.
4. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: Three glass entrance doors feature a fretwork of blue and gold anodized aluminum installed during the 1960s. There are two secondary entrances on 13th Avenue, each topped by circular window.
 - b. Windows: The second story of the entrance has round-arched windows, as does the nave. The dome has twenty-four windows--eight large ones at the base, eight dormer windows at the second tier, and eight eyebrow windows at the top. In addition, there is a skylight at the pinnacle of the dome.
5. Roof:

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- a. Shape: The cathedral has a flat roof with a cross-gabled clerestory section. This upper roof, on which the dome sits, is slate.
- h. Dome: Faced with Indiana limestone, the steel and reinforced-concrete dome is 65' in diameter and rises 120' above the clerestory roof of the building.

C. Description of Interior:

- 1. Floor plans: The cathedral is in the shape of a Roman cross, having three longitudinal aisles, and a dome placed at the intersection of the transepts and the nave. The main entrance, organ, and choir lofts are located opposite the altar. Massive piers, six on each side, separate the nave from the side aisles and chapels. The floor-to-ceiling height of the nave is 75'.
- 2. Stairways: A circular stairway leads to a colonnaded balcony at the base of the dome.
- 3. Flooring: The entrance porch and narthex are paved in marble; the nave has a wood floor; the semicircular apse has a multi-colored marble floor with green and gold mosaics.
- 4. Wall and ceiling finish: Plaster on lath. The ceiling is vaulted and richly panelled.

D. Rectory:

A three-story rectory measuring 43' x 79' is located on the southeast corner of 13th Avenue and 14th Street. Completed in 1930, the rectangular building faced in Indiana limestone is joined to the cathedral by a one-story hyphen. The cost of the rectory and adjacent garage was \$100,000.

The rectory has a center-hall plan, with a suite of three offices, the dining room, kitchen and laundry facilities on the first floor. The second floor has the rector's study and chambers, the assistant's study and chambers and two guest rooms. Housekeepers' and maids' quarters, as well as study rooms and additional guest chambers, are located on the third floor.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Original architectural drawings: None located.

B. Early views:

- 1. The Altoona Mirror published a dedication edition September 2, 1931, which contains several photographs of the building.
- 2. "Ward-Wide News" (Altoona: Ward Trucking Corporation, 1960), includes photographs of the interior prior to its completion and documents the finishing work underway. Altoona Mirror library clippings files.

C. Bibliography:

- 1. Primary sources:

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"Cathedral Parish Has Fine Rectory," (September 2, 1931).

"Cathedral Parish To Have Rectory," (April 21, 1931).

"Cathedral To Be Opened in Fall," (May 15, 1931).

"Civic Plaza Proposed at Cathedral," (August 7, 1973).

"Fine Cathedral is Now Assured," (date illegible).

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Lovett, George I. "New Cathedral is Model Structure," (September 2, 1931).

"Priest's Home is Now Occupied," (March 24, 1931).

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2. Secondary sources:

Altoona-Johnstown Diocese. The Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament. Altoona: Privately printed, n.d. Revised and republished in 1989.

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Tatman, Sandra and Roger W. Moss. Biographical Dictionary of Philadelphia Architects. Philadelphia: The Athenaeum, 1985. Contains a short biography and project list for George I. Lovett.

- E. Additional Sources: The American Institute of Architects Archives, and the Athenaeum of Philadelphia both hold collections of Lovett's papers and architectural drawings which may be useful for more extended research on the cathedral.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This report was part of a larger project to document the city of Altoona, Pennsylvania. The project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER), Robert Kapsch, chief, at the request of America's Industrial Heritage Project (AIHP), Randy Cooley, director. An overview of the history of the city (HABS No. PA-5784) and an overview of the downtown (HABS No. PA-5789) provide context for these buildings as well as a comprehensive list of sources. See also additional HABS reports on buildings in the city and other neighborhoods.

This report was prepared by Nancy Spiegel in the summer of 1989 under the direction of Alison K. Hoagland, HABS

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historian and Kim E. Wallace, supervisory historian. Spiegel's and other project historians' work was published as Railroad City: Four Historic Neighborhoods in Altoona, Pennsylvania (Washington, D.C.: HABS/HAER, National Park Service, 1990), edited by Kim E. Wallace and Sara Amy Leach.